William A. Bihn, 1990
416 Chase Street
Sonoma, CA

The Bihn Family Hatcheries, A Tape Recorded Memoir

Transcribed by
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William Henry Bihn and Sylvan, his brother, moved out to California in 1903 and began the hatchery business just outside of the city limits on Bodega Avenue, with the help of a loan from George P. McNear, who was a feed and grain merchant in Petaluma.

Shortly after, Sylvan returned, back to Ohio, from whence both brothers came, and because his wife would not move out to California. So William Henry wrote to his wife Anna Rose, and she came out and joined him and the hatchery business was underway.

The building was a wooden frame building and the incubators were built on the premises. They were called "flat top" because there was only one tray of eggs in each unit, unlike the cabinet type. It was heated with a hot water, natural gas hot water heater. Without a pump the circulation of the water was by convection. The heater moved the water through a circuit of pipe about 25 feet and returned to the heater. So, that was the method of keeping the units warm. They regulated the heat by opening and closing a vent, which seems kind of crude, but it worked. There's a thermometer setting just above the top of the egg and in the still air unit the temperature reading was controlled as best they could at 103 [degrees]. That meant that

in the middle of the egg the temperature was close to 99 [degrees].

Sylvan and William Henry had no previous hatchery experience except crude small farm type incubators, and they came out to Petaluma because it was being known then as the "Egg Basket of the World" and would be in the area where there would be many farmers or baby chick customers.

The White Leghorn breed was the main egg laying breed at the time and William Henry did not produce any of his own hatching eggs; he had independent farmers under contract and bought the hatching eggs from them. As the years went along he kept increasing the capacity and adding on to the building. Eventually, it became a huge two-story building with a capacity of 250,000 eggs, which was then recognized as the largest chicken hatchery in the world. William Henry had a sign out in front to state just that.

When he first started in business, the baby chicks were delivered by horse and wagon. Oftentimes then Anna Rose would make the delivery. The crates were of box wood with a straw bottom and they would hold 100 baby chicks per crate. At that time, the hatchery did not engage in any egg laying contest because they didn't have their own blocks, nor did any of their farmers under contract engage in any such contest. The breeding farms are the ones that would enter and engage in that kind of activity for their own advertising.

The hatchery would buy the eggs, the hatching eggs, that is,

from the independent farmers, on a basis of the market for fresh eggs. They would give the farmers an additional 10 cents a dozen above the market quotation.

Let's see, temperature, humidity. Humidity in the incubators was not controlled, but they were able to get a fairly high hatchability. The eggs were candled at four days after incubation and the infertile eggs were taken out and sold on the market as a lower grade. They could be used by bakeries. The eggs were turned twice a day and this was quite a chore, because they had to be turned by hand. Each unit had one layer of four trays. They were built out of one-half inch redwood ribs that were beveled so the eggs could be flopped from side to side. They would pull a tray out, give it a little tilt and they would go and lean to the left. The next time they pulled the trays out they would give them a little tilt and they would lean to the right. That was "turning of the eggs," which was necessary to keep the embryo from sticking to one spot in the egg as the hatching procedure progressed from day one until hatching at 21 days.

William Henry and Anna Rose then began raising a family. They ended up with five children, four boys and one girl.

William Henry died at a young age of 55 of a massive heart attack in 1932, and Anna Rose continued the business with the help of her oldest sons, Edward and Cyril.

William enrolled in the University of California at Davis in 1935, and took a two-year non-degree course and majored in

poultry. Upon finishing this course of instruction, he joined the family hatchery and worked as an incubator operator, and a blood testing crew member. At that time all the breeding stock were blood tested to eliminate the pullorum disease which was transmitted from hen to the egg. Upon hatching, one infected chick could spread the disease rapidly through the brooder and it resulted in a very high mortality.

When the war came along, William (nickname "Bill") entered the Army Air Corp and served for four years. He was in Italy for a year and a half until the war ended. On returning home Anna Rose turned the business over to Edward and William to operate it as a partnership.

Previous to this, Cyril, often known as "Cy," left the family hatchery just prior to the outbreak of World War II and entered into a group of poultrymen who organized themselves into the Petaluma Cooperative Hatchery. The first site of this cooperative was at the Durham Ranch on Bodega Avenue in the Wilson School District. They remodeled the barn and began operations there using Petersime Incubators which was one of the types that the family hatchery had. They were cabinet type incubators and they held 36,000 eggs per unit. They were heated by electrical units and controlled thermostatically with forced air, a feature which kept the temperature unit uniform throughout each unit.

William Henry had bought some Robbins incubators and also some Smith incubators. The Smith incubator was a walk-in type,

huge units compared to the others. The Robbins incubator was a non-walk-in type. But there was some difficulty over infringement of patent. The Robbins units that William Henry bought had to be sealed until the lawsuit was settled.

The lawsuit was between the Smith Incubator Company and Robbins. The Smith case prevailed. The Robin incubators had to be returned to the manufacturer as a result of the settlement of the suit.

Let's see where I am now. Oh, to continue with the Cooperative Hatchery story. Cy was manager and after starting the operation on the Durham Ranch they continued to add to their capacity. They had started out very small and during the war the building was destroyed by fire. It was determined that it was arson, and the culprit was never brought to justice. They suspected it was a disgruntled employee who had been fired. Then they bought some property closer into town on Bodega Avenue and began to erect a modern brick building. During the war it was difficult to get materials, but they pursued the paperwork and the red tape. And a modern building was erected. They purchased Bundy incubators because it was a smaller unit than some of the others. I think each unit had about 18,000 eggs.

To get back to the family hatchery, Bill and Ed continued their partnership association for two years and then had a parting of the ways. Bill left the family hatchery and engaged in a partnership with Irving Gardner, and they reopened the Joe Pedicid hatchery on Western Avenue which had been closed by

bankruptcy proceedings. Irving Gardner put in a high bid and took over as owner. Bill joined him as a partner and they had Bundy incubators. They continued as a partnership for two years and were mainly selling New Hampshire and New Hampshire Cornish cross baby chicks for fryers and roasters.

At the conclusion of their association, two years later, they split up, and Bill then moved to Sonoma and began operation of his own hatchery known as William A. Bihn Hatchery on Carriger Road in the El Verano area of Sonoma. Bill specialized in hatching New Hampshire and Cornish Cross chicks for meat birds from 1956 until the fryer business became very highly competitive in California, with lower cost of production states such as Arkansas and Mississippi. At that time production of meat birds went into a slump because the small farmers in this area could not compete with the states in the east and the south that had their lower cost of operation.

Oh, I forgot to mention something about the Cooperative Hatchery. At the end of Bill's association with Irving Gardner, his brother Cy was killed flying his own plane in the San Pablo Bay on a very foggy June day. His body was not discovered until five and one-half months later, when it washed up on the shores of Tubbs Island on the north shore of San Pablo Bay. Bill was then hired to take Cy's place as manager at the Co-op hatchery, and the hatchery had a large number of members in the Petaluma, Santa Rosa area. They had some egg production farmers as well as meat, fryer and roaster growers with the majority of the members

growing meat birds. They did a large amount of business before Cy was killed. A new addition was put on and the hatchery capacity was increased to about 400,000 egg capacity.

Then when the Depression hit the meat bird growers, the Petaluma Cooperative Hatchery started to suffer and by that time Bill had been fired by the Board of Directors, and like I said earlier, moved to Sonoma.

The fryer business continued to be fairly good for several more years. Let's see, about 1959 to 1960 the small private growers began to be forced out because they couldn't continue. The Co-op hatchery declined in membership to the point that it was finally closed and the building was rented to the Bundeson brothers. They continued to operate for several years, then their business declined and the Board of Directors of the Coop hatchery sold the property to Paul Szell, who was manufacturing office furniture. It continued to be in business in that type of business up from then and including today.

Going back to the hatchery business in the 20s and 30s, the Bihn hatchery as well as many other hatcheries in the county, shipped a huge amount of baby chicks to the three states of Utah, Colorado and Idaho. The farmers back there considered the Petaluma area as the best place to purchase baby chicks even though there were hatcheries back in those states. Sonoma County did a huge business. The chicks were shipped in cardboard boxes, 100 chicks to the box, by rail. The cars were heated and air conditioned. I don't remember how many boxes they could put in

each car, but the birds could be in transit for three days. To be successful, three days is about the limit.

Sexing day-old baby chicks began in the early 30s. The technique was perfected in Japan, and Japanese sexers came to this country, came to California, and taught the local people how to determine the sex of the day-old baby chicks. The vent of the baby chicks was spread open and if the technique was properly mastered, they could look into the vent and by properly spreading it they could determine the roosters by a small penis. However, it wasn't very simple to get up to 99 percent accuracy. It was easier to get about 85 percent. Getting up close to 100 was the difficult part, but many people were able to master the technique. They were considered to be very well paid in those days. I don't remember exactly what the scale started with. Later in the 30s, they got one cent per chick.

The baby cockerels were not marketable because they had no meat value when they matured. They were destroyed at the time of sexing. A farmer had to pay double price as opposed to a straight run when the industry first started. Chicks were delivered as they hatched. The baby cockerels were grown until they would average about one and one-half pounds or so, live weight, or two pounds. Then they were sold at what they called, at that time, broilers, because they could be halved and broiled for a chicken dinner.

The "spring chicken" term came from the fact that baby chicks for egg production at that time were hatched practically

99 percent in February, March and April, with a week or two on either end, and so they were considered spring chickens being hatched in those months. Baby cockerels, when they were big enough to market, got the name "spring chickens."

Then, as the sexing of the chicks was perfected, the cockerels were destroyed at day-old, because of the competition from the heavier breeds like New Hampshire Reds. Other heavier breeds were the only ones that were grown for meat.

The baby cockerel was dumped in a big barrel and smothered, and they became valuable as mink feed. Some of the mink farmers from the Wisconsin area were starting to proliferate into bigger and bigger farming businesses. The competition for mink feed was becoming more intense. The mink have to have a certain percentage, I think it is like 20 percent of fresh fish or fresh meat along with dry cereals, mixed into a kind of stew or paste, in order to reproduce. The mink cannot reproduce unless they have this 20 or so percent of fresh meat or fresh fish. So they realized that the baby cockerels were available, they moved, many of them out to this area and used the baby cockerels as part of the diet and they paid one cent a pound. That was pretty cheap fresh protein for the mink.

The hatcheries advertised in such journals as the Pacific Rural Press, and direct mailing. Our family hatchery had a brochure printed up from time to time and used direct mailing.

The Petaluma Cooperative Hatchery was not licensed according to state code, and was not licensed to do business outside the

State of California.

Going back to the Depression years, the California poultrymen, in the Sonoma County area, particularly, were able to survive fairly well as compared to many other areas of the country, such as industrialized areas where the unemployment was high. California as a state was much better off and so the poultrymen in our area were among those that were able to do better during the Depression than in many other areas.

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Narrator Personal Information Questionnaire

Name BIHN (Last) WILLIAM (First) A (Middle) _____ (Maiden)

Address 416 CHASE ST
SONOMA CA

Marital status: Married ___ Single ___ Divorced ___ Widowed ✓

Birthdate 9/8/17 Birthplace PETALUMA CA

Length of residence in Petaluma (or Sonoma County) LIFETIME

Education: Elementary school ST VINCENTS ACAD

Secondary school ✓ Grad ✓

College U.C. DAVIS 2 YRS Grad ✓

Other _____

Occupation(s) or former occupations(s) _____

Travels 4 YRS ARMY AIR CORPS

Organizations, clubs ROTARY KIWANIS

Other special interests _____

Additional comments _____

THANK YOU!

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Family History Questionnaire

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Parents*	WM HENRY BAHN		OHIO	1937
	ANNA ROSE MYER		OHIO	1980
Brothers & Sisters	EDWARD I		PETALUMA	1978
	CYRIL J		"	1957
	MARGARET		"	
	JOHN F		"	
Grand-parents*				
Spouse	MARGARET WEBB	1910		1992
Children	ROGER	1937		
	JULIE	1949		1975
	ELAINE	1950		
	CYRIL	1957		
Grandchildren				

*Please include maiden name of mother and grandmothers.

THANK YOU!

PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM
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PLACE Sonoma Clue

DATE 2-22-94

William A Bell
(Interviewee)

(for the Petaluma Historical Museum)